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ABSTRACT

This booklet seeks to acquaint education association leaders with the concept of the community power structure, specifically with how to identify powerful individuals in the community and their role in decision making. The following topics are covered: the nature of community decision making, bases for community influence, characteristics of power actors, and the identification of power actors. Included in the section for this last topic are mini-sections on interviewing and communicating with members of the power structure and looking at it from their point of view. (JA)

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for education associations

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Foreword

Teachers and education associations too often have had a tendency to isolate themselves from the community. However, education association leaders have learned—often the hard way—that it is necessary to know and communicate with the opinion leaders of the community.

Changes in the school system—curriculum innovations, new facilities, sex education, or professional negotiation—are really changes in the community. And changes require either endorsement by community opinion leaders or citizen approval.

People in the community need to be prepared for and made familiar with the benefits and objectives of change. If this is not done, they will not support it—because individuals and groups will not support that which they do not understand. The key to community understanding and support usually lies with a handful of influential citizens. If the school is an instrument of the community, it is a part of the community decision-making process. Such a relationship requires educators to learn how to identify and influence the decisions and actions of the people who communicate with others. The group of people who influence the decisions of others is commonly known as "the community power structure." The term *power structure* in this sense is generally considered to have come into use with Floyd Hunter's book *Community Power Structure*. He described it as the group at the apex of the community's social-economic pyramid.

Ideally, communication about educational matters takes place between educators and the entire public. However, the fact remains that certain people in the community are more important to the success or failure of educational projects than others. Since it is also necessary, as Gordon McCloskey points out in his book *Education and Public Understanding*, that educators direct their energy into efforts that are likely to be the most useful, they must know the way to initiate these efforts.

This booklet, then, seeks to acquaint education association leaders with the concept of the community power structure: how to identify these individuals and their role in decision-making. Naturally, the suggestions made may not apply to all school dis-

tricts, especially the very small ones. However, in all probability, the advice will apply to many school districts, particularly those with at least several schools in communities which have established trade or business centers.

The Nature of Community Decision-Making

Every social system has certain individuals who play key roles in its decision-making. This applies to the basic social unit—the family—and to all informal and formal organizations, including the community itself. Within every education association, for example, certain key individuals are considered as influential in bringing about changes. They do it by exercising influence or authority.

"Father (or mother) knows best"—the mere authority of this family role provides the right to control the actions of others in the family. Elected or appointed officers of an organization have the authority to direct the efforts of others.

Influence is different from authority. Influence often doesn't come through an elective or appointive role. Influential individuals possess certain abilities in guiding and directing others, such as specific knowledge, skills, or reputation.

Why some people are more influential in the decision-making process than others is not as important to the purpose of this booklet as being able to determine *who* the people are who exert influence.

Research of political scientists and sociologists indicates that a power structure exists and is evident in every social system. It is evident in communities and often identifiable in acceptance or rejection of educational issues in a community.

Ralph B. Kimbrough contributed substantial research to support the contention that decisive power is exercised in most local school districts by relatively few persons. He pointed out, in the book *Political Power and Educational Decision-Making*, that since a few persons hold top positions of influence in the informal power structure of a school district, the success of significant education projects and proposals is often heavily dependent upon their support.

These "power actors," research has shown, often relate to each other. And the relationship produces a power structure. A caution to be noted early is that the power structure varies from one community to another, and changes within any community over a period of time.

Another caution to be noted early is that the advice offered in this booklet will have to be varied in order to fit the unique characteristics of an individual community, such as a city which has experienced extremely rapid growth. Also, in some new communities with a transient population, power structures may be difficult to identify because they may not yet have been formed in the traditional sense used in this booklet.

Ronald C. Powers, of Iowa State University, has researched four different types of power structures. Some communities may have a *one-person* power structure. A community with one major industry is sometimes described as a "company town" or as a town "owned" by one person. Other small communities where one or a few families have been dominant for generations are likely to have a single power structure.

Still other communities have a *small group* of power actors that controls the community policy-making decisions. Many years ago, some communities with a local aristocracy would have been included in this category.

Split communities are a third possibility in classifying power structures. Some communities have an almost even percentage of rural-urban, Republican-Democrat, labor-management, white-Negro, or union-nonunion residents. Each of the two segments of the population is likely to have its power structure, thus producing two influence centers in the same area.

A "*power pool,*" the fourth possibility, is probably the most frequently found power structure. Sociologists described a "pool" as 10 to 25 persons who wield the most influence in the community's decision-making. Not all of them, though, will be key decision-centers in *every* community issue. In small communities, with a population of 1,500 or less, research shows that most of the power pool is involved in all community issues. But as the community size increases, power actors have a tendency to specialize in influence on certain community issues. Only a few of the power actors, for example, may be key decision-makers when education issues are at stake. Different power actors may be more influential in purely political issues; others in other community issues.

The power pool structure has a number of implications for persons who seek change in a community. Power actors need to be *identified for each major community issue*. The power of influence may vary from one individual to another. Identifying the power actors for a given issue cannot be viewed as a one-time task. Analyses and identifications must be made periodically in a community in order to detect changes in influence centers.

Although some individuals within a power pool are more influential than others on specific issues, research reveals that there are communication networks within the pool. Association leaders, for example, who have identified and communicated with power actors on education issues often find this a means of communicating with other members of the total power structure. It also provides a means for communicating with other people in the community.

Bases for Influence

Somewhat surprisingly, the most influential people in a community are often not those in positions of formal authority. This is particularly true, research says, in communities with a population of more than 2,500. It doesn't mean that publicly elected or appointed officials do not have power; rather, they play a major role in implementing decisions within their areas of official influence. The board of education, for example, makes the final decision to initiate sweeping changes in curriculum or to present a budget to the public which will require additional money. But the unofficial, informal power structure has the most to do with gaining community acceptance and approval.

Informal Power Positions

Most sociological research indicates that persons believed to have the most power in a community hold few, if any, formal positions in that community. In fact, one study suggests that there is less than a 50-50 chance of identifying the top power actors in a community by merely listing persons holding formal positions of authority.

Top power actors exercise influence largely through access to persons holding formal leadership positions. There is a rea-

sonable chance that the most influential people held formal leadership positions 5 to 15 years ago. The president of an organization, such as the Rotary Club, Chamber of Commerce, or parent-teacher association, may not be as influential as the person who was head of the organization a few years ago.

Educators are usually not closely related to the top power structure. Most research indicates that educators do not know who the top power actors are, and that members of the power structure often are not well-acquainted with school administrators and are less likely to know leaders of education associations. School administrators and association leaders may know and work closely with those in formal positions of authority, such as the mayor or president of the Chamber of Commerce. But seldom do they know the influence-leaders in city government or among businessmen.

Power actors usually achieve positions of influence in a number of ways. Several research studies describe the "route" suggested by community leaders to arrive at informal positions of top community leadership. The route often includes such factors as being successful in one's own business, being active and "visible" in community activities, joining and becoming active in clubs and community groups, and following in the footsteps of other successful power actors.

In studying the rise of individuals to positions of influence, researchers have compared previous activities of top power actors in communities with the advice they offered younger persons "on the way up." In most cases, the advice of the top power actors is a step-by-step account of their own accomplishments and activities 10 to 15 years earlier!

Leading Factors

Ronald Powers' analysis of studies in rural communities describes a number of *factors affecting influence and social power:*

- Past achievements of the individuals
- Access to ideas

- Skill in working with others
- Ready access to and contact with others
- Influence within community organizations
- Access to needed resources
- Family background
- Past participation in community groups
- Long-time residence in the community
- Age, occupation, and education
- Control of jobs, wealth, credit, or mass media.

Evidence exists to support the contention that the control of money, credit, employment, or the mass media is important in community influence, especially if combined with many of the other influential factors listed above.

Businessmen are in the forefront of community power structures—occupying perhaps as much as 75 percent of the total power structure. Ralph Kimbrough reports that businessmen actually exercise the greatest effect and often dominate education policies not only at the community level, but across the nation.

Characteristics of Power Actors

Research in the field of community power generally concludes that power actors are predominantly men, particularly in larger communities. Women are active and influential in determining the acceptance of many education issues in a community, but men seem to be more dominant and active in initiating communitywide decisions.

In relatively stable communities, power actors are most often—

- Persons 50 years old and over
- In the higher income group

- Those with access to, or control of, the resources of credit, money, employment, or the mass media
- Above the average general education level of the community
- Self-employed businessmen, owners, or executives
- Long-time community residents
- Formerly active participants in community affairs, former members of important community groups, and former formal leaders of those groups.

Says Kimbrough: "The representation of educators (e.g., school board members, school administrators, teachers) in the top levels of the power structure is typically weak."

As a rule, public professionals are not in the community's top power structure. Except for lawyers, other professionals, including physicians and the clergy, are usually not found to be power actors. Persons of power come from many walks of life, depending upon the economic and social structure of the school district.

This may account, then, for many of the failures of boards of education and superintendents to obtain support from community leaders for increased funds and other issues. Very often boards and superintendents direct informational and persuasive efforts at the various professionals, current heads of formal organizations, and others who are in formal positions of authority but who do not represent the real community decision-makers. Similarly, leaders of local education associations often contact these persons in efforts to convince the community of the importance of objectives they are trying to achieve through professional negotiation.

Too often association leaders have been seeking out and talking with those who really do not hold the keys to influencing others!

Identifying Community Power Actors

There are basically three main ways to identify individuals in a community who appear to be the primary power actors. One

way is to identify the persons who have the most potential for power, those holding *formal leadership positions*. Another way is to find who actually has been most influential in specific community *decisions* or *events*. A third technique involves the identification of persons reported to have power: the *reputational technique*.

While some studies support one or the other of the three techniques, the most reliable way is to combine the reputational and identification-of-events techniques. Ronald Powers cautions the inexperienced person that finding people who actually trigger community decisions may be difficult. The danger here is the assumption that power actors "do something" that is visible. Often a power actor's influence on others may not be visible even to trained observers.

Local education association leaders can begin to develop an insight into the community and decision-making in the community through the reputational technique of identifying power actors.

Ten Basic Steps

There are ten basic steps in finding individuals who appear to be power actors in community decision-making:

1. Identify the specific geographical area.
2. Define the specific issue.
3. Select an appropriate number of "knowledgeable" individuals who should be interviewed.
4. Develop an approach to use in contacting the knowledgeable individuals.
5. Develop appropriate questions to ask them.
6. List those you think are the power actors for the issue in question.
7. Interview, personally, each "knowledgeable."
8. Summarize the information received from these interviews.

9. Check the reliability of the summary list of power actors by interviewing two or three persons who received most "votes."
10. Make final adjustments in the list obtained, which should cover the community power pool.

The technique, one step at a time, follows.

Defining the Geographical Area. This is the total area where the issue will be resolved. If an education association seeks community support for curriculum changes or negotiation goals for teachers, the area in question is the school district. In a consolidated district with several small communities, separate areas would be defined and a study made in each. The association would have to study each separate population and trade center because power actors in one community of the school district would probably not be power actors in another. There is little research so far that suggests that a unified school district power structure exists in recently consolidated or reorganized school districts.

Defining the Specific Issue. Researcher Powers recommends that no more than four different issues be studied at one time in identifying community power actors. He suggests a question be asked regarding persons most influential in general community affairs, followed by no more than three specific issue areas. The issues can be stated in broad terms, such as education, school operation, or the teachers association, or may be of a more specific nature, such as a school bond issue, school facilities, or school curriculum.

Selecting the Knowledgeables. A number of individuals must be selected for interviews. The knowledgeables are asked who they think are the community's power actors (they won't be asked in that specific manner, though).

Association leaders should make a careful study of who should be interviewed. The individuals should be in a position to see, hear, and know a great deal about the community by virtue of their various occupations and day-by-day activities. Knowledgeables should represent a cross section of the community—business, government, education, politics, and religion. They should include both men and women and represent various

age groups. Typical people to be interviewed include the director of the community United Fund or Community Chest, the secretary of the Chamber of Commerce, public agency heads, some elected officials, political party leaders, bankers, news media reporters, or editors.

How many should be interviewed? The decision is obviously dependent upon the size of the community. Powers offers this guideline:

Size of Community	*Number of Knowledgeables To Interview*
250-1,000	5
1,000-2,500	7
2,501-5,000	8
5,001-10,000	10
10,001-100,000	15

If the geographical area has a population larger than 100,000, there are probably several "communities" represented within the total population, so the school district should be divided into separate survey areas, utilizing the same guidelines as described above.

After interviewing is completed, if a degree of consensus on power actors isn't evident, more knowledgeables will need to be identified and interviewed. This should not be necessary, Powers points out, if the original list of interviewees was chosen with care. In communities where "split" power structures exist, such as Protestant-Catholic or labor-management, it may be necessary to add knowledgeables until certain names begin to appear clustered on each side. A cluster of named power actors for labor, another for management, etc., should appear.

Developing the Approach. Before developing the questionnaire to be used in interviewing, consideration should be given to the way in which knowledgeables are first approached. For example, if teachers are to conduct the survey for the association, they will need to introduce themselves, identify themselves as teachers and members of the association, explain why they are asking the questions, how they intend to use the data, and clarify any questions the interviewees may have.

Powers offers the following guide on how such an approach might be made:

1. Introduce self, explain position with the school district and education association.

2. State the reasons for the study.

   (Knowledge of leadership patterns helpful to the education association that seeks greater involvement with members of the community.)

   (Appropriate improvements to the educational program depend upon involvement of key people.)

   (Main purpose—to improve understanding of community leadership and organizations.)

3. State the reason for the interview.

   (Belief that the interviewee's position in the community [occupation, experience] provides the opportunity to observe community leaders.)

4. State intended use of the information.

   (Information provided will not be reported to others in any way so as to identify the source.)

   (The information obtained from the respondent will increase the interviewer's understanding of community leadership.)

5. Ask if there are any questions before proceeding.

Developing Specific Questions. The knowledgeable should be asked to indicate which community organizations and groups play major roles in community affairs. This should start him thinking about the way things get done in the community. Such a question might be stated:

> As I mentioned, I'd like to ask you some questions about community groups and leaders. By "community" I'm referring to this town and the surrounding area from which people come to shop, go to church, and school. There are many organizations and groups in our town. . . .

In your opinion, which are the five most influential groups or organizations in the community?

In your opinion, who are the two most influential people in each of these groups you have mentioned?

In this case, the term *influential* means such things as "carry the most weight" or "have good judgment and others listen to them" or "seem to get things done."

Following the initial questions, the interviewee might be asked who he believes to be most influential in "getting things done" in the community. This could be phrased:

There are probably many individuals who play important roles in community decisions and issues. Some seem to be able to influence others to support a certain project, while others may be able to influence people to reject a proposal.

Thinking of the general affairs of the community (acquiring more industry, improving the educational program, supporting the United Fund, etc.) . . . who are the five people you believe are most influential in this community? Who can make a project go, or if they're opposed to it, probably stop it?

How would you rank them?

What are their occupations?

What is the main reason you named each of these individuals?

The knowledgeable should then be asked a specific question about the issue of concern to the interviewer. For example, if the education association is seeking the identification of power actors on the issue of professional negotiation, the interviewer might begin:

As you know, teachers are now meeting with school administrators in professional negotiation to formulate improvements of our education system.

Who are the five persons you believe would be most influential in the community in acceptance or rejection of the process of negotiation?

How would you rank them?

Could you tell me the main reason why you named each of these people?

Interviewers may find it best to have the questions written down and take notes during the interview. A few people still feel uneasy when notes are being taken during an opinion survey and, if such is the case, it may be wiser to jot down a respondent's replies immediately after the interview. The interviewer should also note the name, address, and occupation of the knowledgeable, length of residence in the community, organization memberships and offices held, and other data to indicate whether he is in a position to know and see community leadership in action.

Some researchers report that they ask the knowledgeable after each question is answered, "Do you feel that perhaps *you* would be included in the list you have just given me?" Some experience has shown that knowledgeables who are really power actors will indicate that when given a chance!

The Interviewer's List of Power Actors. This is a "pretest" step for the survey instrument. Verbalizing the questions before conducting interviews will help the interviewer gain familiarity with the intended approach. It may also help eliminate bias (and provides an interesting comparison after knowledgeables are interviewed—to see how the interviewer's perception of the community power actors compares with others').

Interviewing the Knowledgeables. It is usually best to call and arrange a specific time to interview a person. Some preliminary remarks, planned in the initial "approach" of the interview, can be given over the telephone while arranging for the interview.

Summarizing the Data. When all knowledgeables have been interviewed, the lists should reveal a pool of power actors in the community. By summarizing the lists of persons named by each interviewee, persons named by several knowledgeables should become evident. Record the number of times an individual's name has been mentioned. People named at least several times are the pool of power actors for the general affairs of the community and for the specific issues discussed during the interviews.

If five to eight knowledgeables are interviewed, the names of individuals appearing two or more times for any issue should

be listed. The individuals who are mentioned most frequently are probably the top power actors. When the same names appear on a number of lists for different issues, it can be concluded that they represent the power pool of the community.

A caution: The list now contains the power actors only as defined by those whose occupation and interests are thought to place them in a position to judge power.

Checking the Reliability. The job is not yet finished; the reliability of the data obtained must be checked by interviewing the two or three individuals who were mentioned most often by the knowledgeables. If the original interviewees did accurately perceive the leadership of the community, the final checklist should be a duplicate. Power actors have a tendency to name each other when asked to indicate the names of "influential" community leaders. Any individuals they name, whether or not named by your knowledgeables, should be added to the list of power actors.

Making Final Adjustments. If the reputational technique is carefully followed, a fairly accurate list of the community's power pool should now have been obtained. If identification of power actors on specific education issues was sought, the specific individuals who can influence the thinking of others on those issues should now be known.

A warning is in order, however: One such effort will not suffice for a long period of time. Power is a changing element. It changes as communities change. Suburban, highly transient, or growing communities lack the stability necessary to reveal a list of established power actors. Many school districts have a separate power structure in different subdivision areas of the district. And it keeps changing as people move in and out.

Even in more established communities, identification of the power structure should be repeated and updated every two to three years. New issues may erupt in a community, producing new power actors.

Communicating with the Power Structure

The reputational technique does not reveal how power actors interact with each other. In smaller communities, observers can

sometimes discover which persons identified as power actors get together socially, stop in frequently at each other's place of business, or have coffee together. Some may be related to each other.

Interaction among power actors is an important factor for the association leader—the change agent. It will indicate which clubs and civic organizations provide the best opportunities to meet informally with one or several of the power actors. Many community decisions are made in informal and private settings, before policy-making groups act to legitimatize the decisions.

By knowing the interaction of community power actors, it may be possible to ask a person who knows and who has contact with them to serve as a communication link.

Merely being able to identify key members of the community's power pool, or even knowing their interaction with each other, is not enough. The following questions need to be decided: How would they react to the changes educators hope to accomplish? Will they provided the needed support?

How power actors would react to association proposals and goals, for example, will depend upon (a) *what* those proposals involve, (b) *when* the power actors are informed, (c) *how* they are informed, and (d) *who* informs them.

Looking at It from His Point of View

Writing in *Midland Schools* (March-April 1969), Dr. Powers warns that there are no handy guidelines or sure-fire indicators that tell how, when, or in what way to contact power actors in the community. He suggests that educators view concerns and wishes from the power actor's point of view:

> Ask yourself how your proposal will affect his power base. Will it require people he feels he "controls" to do anything? Will it affect an area of concern in which he has traditionally been active? Will it reduce or increase his control—of credit, money, jobs, and the like?

This "putting yourself in the other fellow's place" is not bad advice at any stage of the public relations process. Such an exercise sensitizes one to the fact that a power actor's response is

based on *his* perception and interpretation of events—not the education association's.

Perhaps, as Kimbrough observed, educators and education associations have failed to involve "the people" sufficiently in the decision-making that confronts the schools and education organizations. (See booklet #8 in this series, *Developing Citizen Committees*, for suggestions on how to involve people in decisions which affect the schools.)

Acceptance of teachers' proposals and professional negotiation in many communities requires an attitudinal change—a change in the traditional way of operating schools and making major decisions about the schools—by administrators and school board members. It also means an attitudinal change on the part of citizens in general, businessmen in particular, and especially the informal group—the power structure.

In order to accomplish a change in attitude, association leaders may need to reconsider some of the basic principles that facilitate or retard change. The principles apply not only to the average citizen in the community but also, and more importantly, to the power actors.

- Persons tend to change when they have participated in the decision to change.
- Persons tend to change to the degree they trust the motives of the person or persons attempting to induce that change.
- Persons tend to change more readily if they are able to influence, reciprocally, the persons or persons attempting to influence them.
- Persons tend to implement change if there is a public commitment to the change.
- Persons tend to resist change to the degree they feel it is imposed upon them.

This is not to suggest to education association leaders that acceptance of education changes cannot occur if the power structure is ignored. Power comes from several sources—public opinion itself obviously serves as a check on the power structure.

Knowledge, numerical strength, and organizational effort are all important bases of power.

But it is important that association leaders know the dynamics of community power. A vital part of this knowledge is the identification of the power wielders. And the time to get acquainted is *before* the association and the community are deadlocked in an education crisis.

The public relations committee, working closely with the elected officers of the education association, should undertake a periodic identification of the power actors. This is especially important in young or growing, more transient communities.

Having identified these individuals, association leaders should *get acquainted* with them on an informal, face-to-face basis.

Periodic communication should be maintained between the association and the power structure. A two-way communication network could entail—

- Circulating regular copies of the association newsletter to members of the power structure.
- Publishing an occasional "Education Memo" for members of the power structure, a special "insider's newsletter" to keep them personally abreast of important developments of concern to the education association and the community.
- Holding an annual informal meeting with members of the power structure—perhaps during American Education Week—or an occasional coffee session in the offices of the association on a Saturday morning.

Call them decision-makers, power actors, key influentials, or "legitimizers"—they are present in every community. They exercise social power. They may be responsible for community acceptance or rejection of goals or programs undertaken by the education association.

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